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First Strike Options and the Berlin Crisis, September 1961

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In stark contrast to the close U.S.-Russian relationship of today, forty years ago serious tensions over Berlin and Germany and the danger of world war clouded Moscow-Washington relations. Fred Kaplan's article in the October 2001 issue of *The Atlantic Monthly*, "JFK's First Strike Plan," shows that key White House officials and the President himself briefly considered proposals for a limited nuclear first strike against Soviet military targets in the event that the Berlin crisis turned violent. Kaplan's essay is partly based on archival materials that the National Security Archive obtained through declassification requests. Exploring John F. Kennedy's approach to the Berlin crisis, one of most serious Cold War crises, Kaplan presents the grim situation that unfolded after Kennedy met with Chairman Nikita Khrushchev in Vienna in early June 1961. Worried about the future of their East German ally, the Soviets presented the West with an ultimatum: a peace treaty with East and West Germany (including "free city" or neutral status for West Berlin) must be negotiated by December. That deadline and then the building of the wall dividing West Berlin in August 1961 raised East-West tensions and U.S. policymakers and their NATO allies wondered when the next shoe would drop.

While Kennedy saw West Berlin's security as a top priority, he also wanted to avoid war. If it broke out, however, he understood that his military alternatives were grim. Some on the White House staff saw the Pentagon's war plans as catastrophic and proposed instead a limited surprise attack on the Soviet Union if military confrontation over Berlin unfolded. As Kaplan shows, Kennedy was aware of the first-strike plan but was even more interested finding ways to prevent the use of nuclear weapons. The following are some of the documents that are central to Kaplan's presentation.

Note: The following documents are in PDF format.

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Document 1

Carl Kaysen to General Maxwell Taylor, Military Representative to the President, "Strategic Air Planning and Berlin," 5 September 1961, Top Secret, excised copy, with cover memoranda to Joint Chiefs of Staff Chairman Lyman Lemnitzer, released to National Security Archive (appeal pending at Department of Defense).

Source: National Archives, Record Group 218, Records of the Joint Chiefs of Staff (hereinafter RG 218), Records of Maxwell Taylor (Document still under appeal at Department of Defense; appeal for withheld Department of Energy information already rejected by DoE)

Fred Kaplan first explored White House nuclear policy and the Berlin crisis in his path-breaking book on U.S. nuclear planning, *The Wizards of Armageddon* (New York, Simon and Schuster, 1983). In the course of his research he interviewed a number of Kennedy administration officials, including NSC staffer Carl Kaysen. Kaysen told him that, during the summer of 1961, when East-West tensions over Berlin threatened to turn dangerous, he had prepared a study on the possibility of a limited first strike against the Soviet Union. Nearly twenty years later, that study was declassified (with excisions that are under appeal at the Defense Department). What motivated Kaysen was his concern that the U.S. nuclear war plan--the Single Integrated Operational Plan (SIOP)--involved an unimaginably catastrophic attack involving thousands of nuclear weapons.⁽¹⁾ The SIOP included an option for preemption, a first strike in the event that Washington had strategic warning of an imminent Soviet attack, but that was not what Kaysen had in mind. In keeping with then-current interest in controlled nuclear response and presidential options, he wanted the president to have military alternatives that involved less loss of life in the Soviet Union and less danger to U.S. territory. Therefore, he proposed contingency planning for a limited nuclear first strike on the handful of Soviet ICBMs. Kaysen recognized that there were risks and uncertainties in such a plan, but he nevertheless believed that a limited approach would encourage the Soviets to avoid attacks on U.S. urban-industrial targets as well as "minimiz[e] the force of the irrational urge for revenge."



Document 2

Major William Y. Smith to General Maxwell Taylor, "Strategic Air Planning and Berlin," 7 September 1961, Top Secret, excised copy, released with more information after appeal by National Security Archive.

Source: John F. Kennedy Library, National Security File, box 82, Germany, Berlin, General, 9/7/61-9/8/61 (first published in National Security Archive, [U.S. Nuclear History: Arms and Politics in the Missile Age](#) (Washington, D.C./Alexandria Va, National Security Archive/Chadwyck Healey, 1998)

William Y. Smith, an Air Force officer on General Taylor's staff, prepared a summary of Kaysen's report so that the busy general could get the gist of it without laboring over the detail.⁽²⁾ Despite its summary nature, some of the information contained in Smith's report goes beyond the excised text of Kaysen's study as released by the Defense Department. For example, in annex A, page 2 of the Kaysen report, assumption 1 is withheld in its entirety. Page 2 of Smith's summary discloses that assumption: that 26 of the "essential targets" are the "staging bases that do not need to be hit in the first wave." Moreover, on page 2 of annex B of Kaysen's report, excisions in the third full paragraph concern tactics for overcoming enemy defenses. This material was already declassified in the Smith summary, e.g., the discussion of the use of "low level attacks," mass attacks, and opening corridors



Document 3

Memorandum from General Maxwell Taylor to General Lemnitzer, 19 September 1961, enclosing memorandum on "Strategic Air Planning," Top Secret, released in full on appeal by National Security Archive.

Source: RG 218, Records of Maxwell Taylor, Box 34, Memorandums for the President, 1961

Transcript of this document

On 19 September, a few weeks after Smith prepared the summary of Kaysen's report, Taylor presented Kennedy with the same text.⁽³⁾ Apparently Taylor discussed the summary of Kaysen's paper with the president because on the same day he presented JCS Chairman Lemnitzer with a series of questions that must have arisen in the course of discussion. However the questions were prepared, they clearly reflected the concerns of President Kennedy and Secretary of Defense McNamara, among others, about SIOP-62 (for FY 1962). For example, Kennedy wondered if it would be possible to fashion attacks that excluded urban areas or "governmental controls", China, or the East European satellite states. SIOP-62 entailed a massive attack on targets in Eastern Europe, the Soviet Union, China, North Korea, and North Korea. Thus, if China was not in the war, it would nevertheless be subject to attack. Undoubtedly influenced by Kaysen's report, Kennedy also asked questions about the feasibility of a limited first strike, the prospect of redundant destruction (overkill), and the danger of a false alarm, among others.



Document 4

Memorandum of Conference with President Kennedy, 20 September 1961.

Source: *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1961-63* (Washington, D.C., Government Printing Office, 1998?), 130-131

Taylor transmitted Kennedy's questions for consideration by Commander-in-Chief Strategic Air Command (CINCSAC) Thomas Power who to meet with Kennedy,

Lemnitzer, Taylor, and military aide General Chester Clifton. Only this brief record of the discussion is available and little of it directly bears on the president's questions. If there was any discussion of an "alternative first strike plan," it was not recorded. Part of the discussion centered on General Power's doubts about the latest intelligence estimates of Soviet strategic missile forces--that Moscow only had about 20 ICBM pads. Lemnitzer and Taylor disagreed with Power, who had the audacity to recommend the resumption of U-2 flights over the Soviet Union. In addition, Power believed that there was a risk of a Soviet surprise attack; if "general atomic war was inevitable" he recommended striking first once key Soviet nuclear targets were located. Kennedy did not comment on Power's advice but he was concerned enough to ask his military advisers to find out how long it took the Soviets to launch their missiles.(4)



Document 5

Memorandum for General Taylor from General Lemnitzer, "Strategic Air Planning and Berlin," CM-386-61, 11 October 1961, Top Secret.

Source: RG 218, Records of Lyman Lemnitzer, box 1

Lemnitzer had little use for criticisms of SIOP-62, which he thought was "far better than anything previously in existence." Although Lemnitzer conceded the need for "flexibility of execution and controlled response", he believed that the lack of survivable forces inhibited those goals (that is, if nuclear forces could not survive an attack they had to be used quickly). He suggested that SIOP-63, which was under development, would have important elements of flexibility. Lemnitzer made no complaint about Kaysen's first-strike proposal because preemptive options remained part of U.S. planning for any major conflict with the Soviet Union.

Lemnitzer's tacit rejection of Kaysen's proposal for a limited first strike option meant that Kennedy had no military alternative to the massive attack option posited by SIOP-62. Belying the flexibility that Lemnitzer promised, the attack options of SIOP-63 would involve massive use of nuclear weapons. It remains to be seen whether Taylor informed the President about the JCS's reply or discussed its implications. In any event, in an effort to avoid confrontation and find the basis for an "accommodation," Kennedy and Khrushchev were already carrying on private "pen pal" correspondence.(5)



Document 6

Department of Defense News Release, Address by Roswell L. Gilpatric, Deputy Secretary of Defense Before the Business Council, Saturday, October 21, 1961.

Realizing that the west would not comply with his deadline and no doubt uneasy about the danger of conflict over Berlin, Khrushchev waived the deadline on Berlin in a speech at the Communist party congress on 17 October 1961. To impress further on Khrushchev

the importance of negotiations, Kennedy approved a speech on U.S. military power that Deputy Secretary of Defense Gilpatric delivered before the Business Council, a top-level corporate advisory body. Gilpatric did not disclose how much the U.S. knew about Moscow's tiny ICBM force but he nevertheless implied that U.S. intelligence had a good understanding of the limits of Soviet missile strength: "their Iron Curtain is not so impenetrable as to force us to accept at face value the Kremlin's boasts" about Soviet ICBMs. Describing U.S. strategic nuclear forces, Gilpatric confidently argued that the U.S.'s retaliatory capacity was so enormous that an "enemy move which brought it into play would be an act of self-destruction on his part." Confronted with the U.S.'s second-strike capability, he concluded that the Soviets "will not provoke a major nuclear conflict."

Notes

1. For the history of SIOP-62 and background on U.S. nuclear planning during this period, see David A. Rosenberg, "The Origins of Overkill: Nuclear Weapons and American Strategy, 1945-60," *International Security* 7 (Spring 1983): 3-71.
2. Smith became a lieutenant general, U.S. Air Force, and before retiring in 1991 served as Chief of Staff, Supreme Headquarters Allied Powers Europe (SHAPE) and Deputy Commander, U.S. European Command. During the 1990s he was president of the Institute for Defense Analyses. General Smith is a member of the National Security Archive's board of directors.
3. An excised version is published in FRUS, 1961-63, VIII, 126-29.
4. According to a report that Lemnitzer presented to Kennedy a week later, Soviet missiles could be launched in 5 to 10 minutes if missile crews were on alert, electrical equipment was warmed up, and missiles were fueled and topped. If missiles were unfueled, launching would take between 15 minutes and a half hour. If crews were on routine standby, equipment was cold, and missiles were unfueled, launching would take up to three hours. See Memorandum from Lemnitzer to Kennedy, "Reaction Time Required by the Soviets...", 27 September 1961, FRUS 1961-63, vol. VIII, 152-153.
5. For the correspondence on Berlin, during the early fall of 1961, see FRUS 1961-63, Vol. XIV, 444-455, 502-508.